Urban K12 school-university teacher preparation partnerships:
An initiative of the Great Cities' Universities

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Abstract

The 21 urban research universities that are members of the Great Cities' Universities

(GCU) annually enroll approximately 20 percent of the students in the United States who

are preparing to teach in K12 urban schools. This study examined the experiences of

GCU-sponsored, school-university teacher preparation partnerships in Atlanta, Houston,

Kansas City, St. Louis and Milwaukee. How did the partnership participants describe

their experiences? What were the most important lessons learned? Qualitative analyses,

based on group interviews with each partnership, produced themes which are discussed in

terms of current practice and future implications for preparing urban teachers.

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The concept of *partnership* between urban K-12 schools and universities has served many different program development functions in recent decades (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002). The basic attributes and building blocks for developing school-university partnerships have been amply described in the partnership literature (Hadley, Dickens, Hadley, Brown, Kosterman, & Boger, 2000; Rothstein, 2001; Russell & Flynn, 2000). For example, partnerships that encourage mutual respect among members, flexibility, and the willingness to listen and communicate frequently increase their prospects for building levels of trust and commitment that are essential to adopting a common vision and shared goals (Epstein et al., 2002). In urban settings, the functions of school-university partnerships have run the gamut from serving as catalysts for local systemic reform and renewal (Essex, 2001) to providing prescriptions for improved practice at the classroom level (Hinchey, Mamana, and Steele, 1997).

Increasingly in recent years, and in response to new school reform challenges, school-university partnerships have expanded to incorporate community organizations (Corrigan, 2000; Benson & Harkavy, 2001). While this development has enriched inter-agency partnership communications, it has also raised new issues and challenges in areas such as governance and setting programmatic priorities (Corrigan, 2000).

Yet another major focus of the work among K-12 school-university partnerships has been to address issues in school climate and socialization as impacted by differences in culture and leadership. Benson and Harkavy (2001) and Murtadha-Watts, Belcher,

Iverson, and Medina (1999) stress the role of school-university partnerships for improving "cultural competency" through communication, as well as promoting the role of the school principal in working to actively enhance interpersonal development.

Acknowledging real, fundamental differences between cultures in K-12 schools and universities, Richmond (1996) and Johnston and Wetherill (2002) encourage school-university partnerships to examine school climate as a means to promote positive socialization. Maxson, Wright, Houck, Lynn, and Fowler (2000) expand on this view by arguing for school-university partnerships to address the socialization needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

In teacher preparation, K-12 school-university partnerships have served as the cornerstone for the Professional Development Schools (PDS) movement by helping to document the changing roles of teachers and the costs and benefits of PDSs (Bullough, Birrell, Young, Clark, Erickson, Earle, Campbell, Hansen, and Egan, 1999). Higgins and Merickel (1997) describe linkages between school-university partnerships and different approaches toward establishing PDSs. Chirichello, Strasser, Feola, and Rosenfeld (2001) identify the functions of school-university partnerships for building and enhancing approaches toward implementing PDSs based on different programmatic needs identified at the local level. Moreover, as a result of school-university partnerships, PDSs have addressed the need for greater cross-institutional collaboration (Sheerer, 2000) and have provided support for K-12 academically and behaviorally at-risk students (Harper and Sadler, 2002).

Irrespective of the myriad goals and functions shared among urban K-12 school and university partnerships, there is a paucity of data— particularly from an evaluative

perspective— regarding the effects of the partnership "enterprise" (Badiali, Flora, DeLoach Johnson, & Shiveley, 2000; Connor & Killmer, 2001). While the school partnership literature is replete with information on how to establish partnerships, information on how to best maintain and sustain effective school-university partnerships is insufficient. For example, among those school-university partnerships that are successfully established, why do so many of these partnerships experience serious problems in developing and actually implementing their agendas? What is the nature of participants' experiences in these partnerships? What are the most salient dynamics that impact the work of school-university partnerships and ultimately may determine whether desired outcomes are achieved? In the interest of informing current practices and improving future efforts, what are the implications of these issues for better understanding the dynamics and nature of school-university partnerships from participants' perspectives?

The Great Cities' Universities (GCU), a coalition of 21 urban, public research universities, launched its Urban Educator Corps (UEC) in 2000. The mission of the UEC is to improve current practices in the preparation of urban teachers. UEC member institutions are estimated to be responsible nationwide for preparing approximately 15 to 20 percent of the students enrolled in urban university teacher preparation programs.

The central program focus of the UEC has been its Community Partnership Initiative. In this Initiative, a local partnership—for improving urban teacher preparation—was established among representatives from each teacher preparation program and its local urban school district. University representatives included teacher

education faculty members and administrators involved in teacher preparation. Urban

school district representatives included administrators and supervisors.

Initially, each local partnership team developed a written Action Plan to

address their priority issues for improving urban teacher preparation and addressing their

shortage of qualified teachers. Recruitment, pre-service teacher preparation, in-service

professional development, induction, and retention of teachers for urban schools were the

common themes in the initial plans. These plans included the collection of needs

assessment information, common goals, and strategies for implementation. The UEC

provided an initial grant of $22,000 to each local partnership team to help support this

work. A second award of $22,000 was provided to each team in year two of the Initiative

for further planning and initial implementation.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of

participants among five of the UEC's school-university partnerships. How were these

partnerships established? What were participants' experiences in developing a local

Action Plan for improving urban teacher preparation? What are the dynamics that

affected participants' partnership experiences? Did participants perceive their

partnership work as successful? In the interest of contributing to the school-university

partnership literature, what were the most important lessons learned among participants

in this UEC Community Partnership Initiative?

METHOD

Participants

Five K12-university UEC teacher preparation partnership teams— from Atlanta,

Houston, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and St. Louis— participated in this study. Each team,

comprised of 4 to 8 members, was interviewed as a team while attending a four-day UEC

conference. Across the five teams, there were K12 administrators, a teacher union

representative, university teacher educators, and university administrators affiliated with

urban teacher preparation. Among the 22 White, 11 Black, and 1 Hispanic participant

were 13 males and 21 females.

Group Interviews

A structured interview format, consisting of 23 questions, was developed for this

study. Each partnership group interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was

audio-taped. The interview format was divided into four sections: Background of the

Partnership Team (4 questions), Development of Team Action Plans (5 questions),

Implementation of Team Action Plans (11 questions), and Wrap-up (3 questions).

Under Background, each team was asked to identify its leader(s) and when and

how the partnership team formed. Questions under Development of Team Action Plans

delved into the rationale and need for the local Plan; identification of goals, objectives

and activities; discussion of how the team's Plan was actually formulated; the extent to

which the Plan was aligned with the major work themes of the Urban Educator Corps;

and how UEC meetings/institutes influenced the Plan.

Eleven of the 23 questions focused upon Implementation of the Team Action

Plans. For example, each team was asked specific questions as to whether their goals and

activities had changed over time; how the team functioned and worked together as

partners; whether or not the team established a plan for evaluation and dissemination,

used technology in their work, or was working with partnership teams from other GCU

cities; the degree to which their grant budget was adequate; the extent to which things

had "gone right" and "gone wrong;" and finally perceptions of the sustainability of the local Plan when grant funding ends.

Under the Wrap-Up section of the group interview, each partnership team was asked to identify specific lessons learned and barriers or problems affecting progress in their work. Finally, team participants were asked if they had any other issues of possible interest regarding their partnership experience that were not already addressed in the group interview.

RESULTS

Hard-copy narratives were transcribed from the audio-tapes for the purpose of conducting a qualitative analysis of the narrative data from the five group interviews. Ten questions, judged to be germane to the purpose of this study, were selected from the 23 question structured interview format. These 10 questions, and sample responses across the five partnership teams, are presented below.

Question 1
How did your (partnership) team's Action Plan develop? What processes were used to develop and build consensus for the Plan among the members of your team?

One team participant commented, *"The real action happened in face-to-face meetings between school district teachers and university faculty, contributing to a new level of conversation."* Other team members similarly stated that personal interaction and encounters were an indispensable factor leading toward developing and building support for their Teacher Preparation Action Plan.

Question 2
How has your team functioned and worked together? How frequently do you meet? How else do you communicate?

Participants expressed the belief that to disagree among themselves on a given issue should not be viewed as "personal." Communication of differing perspectives needs to be valued. *"When we disagreed with each other, we didn't disagree with each other so much as (we) had different perspectives from each other about what was happening and so how we mainly deal with that is to talk and to listen to each other."*

It was understood among the members of one team that "talking" together was not only the vehicle to achieve understanding among the partners, but that dialogue within the partnership group was the means to build trust. *"Actually, we talked a lot. We talk over each other, under each other, at each other. We are very honest. We are a very honest group, very open with each other, very comfortable. After all of these meetings, I send minutes to everyone. We react to those. If people think there is an issue left out, they say that."*

One university participant stated, *"In this project, we were very attentive to the school system. We tried to let them lead what we did rather than us because we leaned maybe in the other direction, but we really wanted them to have the say and we could talk about some of the other projects that we've done."* This comment reflected partners' awareness of their differences in institutional affiliation (i.e. K12 schools v. university). Also in response to the question of how their team functions, a participant stated, *"… we are not convinced that we have all of the right voices around the table in the right positions. We are still forming and some of us that have been forming for a while are in different stages of forming."* These comments are reflective of a number of issues. First, does the team—relative to its representation—have adequate "input?" Whether the "right voices" are present suggests concern as to the team's capacity to be able to make

decisions. At the same time, the notion of "stages of forming" suggests an appreciation

for the developmental nature of how individuals with different perspectives on some

issues need a chance to become "partners." This is not an instantaneous process.

Question 3
In implementing your team's Plan to date, would your team's efforts be best characterized as those of a partnership— or as a collaboration?

This question provoked comments that substantiated the importance of thinking

about what it is that makes a "partnership." For example, one participant stated, *"How*

do you form a partnership? As I referred to earlier, a partnership must be a democratic

effort and it is a core belief. You can't dictate a partnership." One university participant

commented, *"We go to the school system and say, what are your needs? We explain to*

them what our needs are."

Question 4
Overall, what have been the main outcomes from implementing your Plan? What things have gone right? What things have gone wrong?

One participant commented, *"We have a group of teachers from three of our*

urban districts that are being given, being paid, an honorarium to meet together with the

challenge of answering these two questions. What is it young teachers need? What is it

that experienced urban teachers need from this university and from the schools to be

successful?"

A member of another partnership team stated, *"Looking at their (teacher-in-*

residence) preliminary reports, we are going to have a powerful piece to present to

school districts, university folks and the university administration that we think could

form some real basis for where we are headed. We plan to go beyond the University with

that presentation. We think Boards of Education should hear it."

Question 5
Have the activities implemented to date helped your team to achieve the objectives stated in your Plan?

Team members provided important insights and raised further questions reflective of their experiences in working together. For example, one university participant commented, *"I think we have really struggled with this whole thing. I certainly have. I don't know if others would agree. The struggle is really in defining how we can make a difference in the schools and how we can be a true partner. This is a pretty big task and how to address that has been our struggle."*

Drawing upon personal experience in this UEC partnership initiative, another participant raised fundamental issues concerning the basic nature of partnerships by commenting, *"Frankly, we have some differing opinions. Some relationships are very different. What does it mean to be involved in a partnership and how are partnerships formed? Do you 'speak' partnerships into existence, or do you bring everyone around the table and hammer out the agreement together?"* A university participant shared the observation that *"…the school systems were actually somewhat amazed to find out that we taught to standards. They somehow didn't know that. And I'm not talking about everybody, but they really saw a connection between what we were doing and what they were doing."*

Question 6
Has implementing your plan resulted to date in the dissemination of information on your activities either in your school district or your university?

Some participants expressed different points of view in regard to the issue of dissemination, revealing some distinct frustration. *"I think we have failed at communication. We haven't done it yet. As UEC participants we have not*

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communicated about our work, but I think after the second meeting (institute) we are almost ready to start communicating." In response, another participant commented, *"We haven't failed."* The first commenter replied, *"Sure we did. She(one team participant) said she wouldn't go to another one of those meetings (university forums for teacher education)."*

Question 7
Have your goals, objectives and/or activities changed over time in terms of actual implementation? If so, how have they changed? What changes have occurred?

One problem with deleterious consequences for program continuity and sustainability is the phenomena of frequent leadership turn-over—particularly in urban K-12 school systems. Yet this problem is not unique to school systems. It often holds adverse effects for urban universities and other agencies in urban settings. One school participant commented, *"We are in transition and some plans have been put aside due to turn-over of the superintendent and others, but we are still making our plans."* Concurrently, a university participant stated, *"The person who was in charge of it (the team plan) left the University."* In reflecting on the difficulties engendered from the leadership turn-over issue, another team member said, *"We (our team) had to determine our goals together."*

Question 8
To what extent do you believe that desired outcomes will be sustainable after the community partnership team funding is concluded?

Not surprisingly, one team response, reflective of a number of responses, focused squarely on the issue of future funding relative to being able to sustain present community partnership efforts. For example, one university team participant stated, *"We*

have to attract long term, deep funding to accomplish our goal. We are talking 5 to 10 years and many millions of dollars. It has been a big effort and I think whether or not we sustain this is problematic right now. We need funds. We have an enormous budget deficit."

Interestingly, a member of another team stated, *"What does need to be sustained is the relationship work and the attention to standards which is so important to the school systems. How it would be sustained is through our resources and I'm talking about our resources, not outside resources being funneled into the partnership, into the urban center. So I think it is sustainable... but it will be sustained because of things we already have going and because of the commitment. We haven't depended on external money."* This latter response suggests that sustaining present work is not merely a problem of attracting new funds, but re-examining how internal (general) funds are allocated and actually used. In part, the challenge is one of maximizing the alignment between available resources and specific program priorities. How can this best be accomplished? Further, is a commitment to demonstrating partnership relationships sufficient to prioritize resource allocation decisions that are ultimately made by school administrators?

Question 9
What are two or three of the most important lessons learned from your community partnership team experience?

Participants across the five partnership teams cited a variety of lessons learned as important to them through the course of their partnership experiences. For example, one K12 school participant said, *"There are many points of view. The university and the*

school district come together to solve problems and I think that what we have learned is we see them, those same problems, those same issues, from different viewpoints. We didn't realize how much sometimes they were alike, but sometimes they (views) were different from our experiences. So we learned to respect others' viewpoints." These comments are emblematic of the need for candid expression among team members and the inherent challenges posed by a willingness to be forthright in expressing and receiving different points of view.

In contrast, a university participant stated, *"We've really done the groundwork and we are learning a lot about how to collaborate and how to actually work with the public schools... We have not always been able to work well with them, and that's probably the biggest lesson."* Implicit in this response is a awareness that differences in institutional affiliation, as a function of exposure to K12 or university cultures, do affect points of view.

The belief that levels of involvement and commitment to a partnership become more distinguishable through increased partnership experience was reflected by another participant who said, *"For me personally, partnership has many different definitions and many people look at cooperation as collaboration. If you use cooperative processes to create partnerships, that is one thing. But true collaborative processes require a level of commitment and a willingness to fight fair and fight healthy, and the outcomes of that are significant. But it is a hell of a lot of work at that level."*

In terms of important lessons learned, yet another participant commented, *"Another lesson we learned in the last year is that for this kind of partnership, the involvement of the superintendent of schools is very important. We had a sudden turn-*

over of the superintendent in the middle of this year and the new superintendent very

quickly embraced this (partnership) because it's bigger than any one entity." Finally,

one university participant, in considering important lessons learned, affirmed, *"The most*

important thing I have learned is that the conceptual framework for our college,

'collaboration for learning and teaching,' has meaning."

Question 10
What are two or three specific barriers or problems that your team has had to address in order to make progress in implementing your Plan?

When asked to identify specific barriers to partnership work that needed to be

addressed, team participants' reactions revealed different levels of feeling about their

respective experiences. For example, one university participant stated, *"There is no*

built-in system to support the collaboration piece, to support the induction program.

There is nothing built into our region system. We (the university) are credit hour driven,

so how do we serve the schools?" This perceived disconnect, or insufficient alignment

between a specific programmatic need (e.g., resources for K12 school and university

partnership work), and extant institutional structures necessary to support this work, was

troubling to many participants.

Within a university institutional structure, a participant said, *"I'm concerned*

about junior faculty. The university is not set-up to support the intensive relationship

building, the intensive collaboration. I'm really worried about junior faculty who are

compassionate and committed. My concern, having one foot in the university and one

foot in the field, is this competing issue all the time."

Yet another university participant, a junior level faculty member, commented,

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"I'm afraid of failing because my pre-service teachers are going to leave their experiences not having changed dramatically, or carrying something that I don't want them to carry with them. The schools are going to say, 'thanks, but you're not helping us out very much, or we don't see much benefit from this relationship. I guess I view that as kind of a scary thing. Am I doing the right things? I don't have time to really reflect."

DISCUSSION

Inherent in these responses is the feeling that not only is school and university partnership work difficult, but it is also risky. On one level, some university teacher preparation faculty may feel committed to a partnership process with K12 schools— yet feel somewhat unsure if they will be able to deliver what the schools really need— not to mention whether their contributions will be recognized within the university culture. On yet another level, there is understandable concern voiced by partnership participants as to whether or not their respective leaders will in fact commit to work across institutions to truly support the implementation of new structures for preparing urban teachers.

The qualitative analysis used in this study followed procedures described by Shaw (1999), Tesch (1990), and Spradley (1979). First, the transcribed narratives were read for clarity of meaning and interpretation. Second, each narrative segment was sorted and grouped with other narrative segments reflective of shared characteristics, issues and/or dispositions. Finally, for each group of narratives, a thematic label was assigned exemplary of the shared characteristics of the grouped narratives.

Based upon the qualitative analysis procedure referenced above, five separate themes were identified and labeled as follows:

- Need to define relationships

- Issues in communication

- Nature of a partnership

- Prepare to deal with change

- Sustaining the team's work.

Figures 1 through 5 provide illustrations of abbreviated, sample responses presented in full in the first part of this section. These responses, which share common attributes, provide a basis for identifying each respective theme.

Collectively, the five themes constructed from this qualitative analysis are important because of the pattern they represent. Within the context of the Urban Educator Corps' Community Partnership Initiative, the purpose of this study was to examine participants' perceptions of their experiences in launching and working in K12 school-University partnerships—with a focus upon issues in urban teacher preparation.

First, relevant to theme 1, findings revealed a need among K12 school and university team participants to define their relationships (e.g., recognizing and being willing to accept differences in points of view related, in part, to institutional affiliation). Concomitantly, issues in communication (theme 2) and understanding the nature of a partnership (theme 3) similarly required team members' collective attention. The importance of these themes serves to corroborate findings reported in the school-university partnership literature (Epstein et al., 2002).

Second, however, findings that contributed to the identification of themes 4 and 5— the need to deal with change and sustaining the team's work, respectively— reveal an important pattern. For example, findings concerning themes 4 and 5 from this study strongly suggest that it is not sufficient for a fledgling partnership team merely to

"be aware" of the importance of dealing with change and sustaining the team's work.
Rather, from the outset of a partnership enterprise, the issue of how to understand and
plan strategically to deal with change and sustainability should necessitate conscious,
volitional action. Kirby and Desmond (2002) reported that the composition of GCU
partnership teams changed from 2000 to 2001 in nearly every case. A synthesis of the
2002 team reports revealed that changes in personnel at both the district and university
levels impacted the ability of teams to focus their work and progress smoothly through
implementation. In terms of the dynamics of the partnership experience, themes 4 and 5
were recognized to be extremely important not only to how team members felt about
what they had done—but also whether they felt hopeful and/or willing to continue their
partnership work in the future.

From a short-term practical standpoint, findings from this study suggest that new
school-university partnership teams would be well advised—immediately upon
commencing their partnership planning efforts—to attend seriously to the consequences
of all five of the themes reported in this research. Clearly, there is no universal,
prescriptive framework to call upon for addressing how to best deal with change and how
to best sustain a partnership's work. Yet, these themes or issues need to be afforded
attention and dealt with directly in the context of a team's planning and implementation
processes. The critical point, suggested by the findings in this study, is that school-
university partnership teams such as those in this study should benefit from recognizing
that their cohesiveness and effectiveness as a team will be determined not only by
defining their relationships, communicating effectively, and defining the nature of their
partnership—but also by their planning efforts for addressing change and the

sustainability of their work. It is in this context that findings from the present study may help to guide new efforts to improve current and future practices among K12 school-university partnerships.

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Theme 1:
need to define
relationships

"partners have
different definitions."
9.2

"we have different
opinions, relations."
5.2

"struggle is how can
we make a
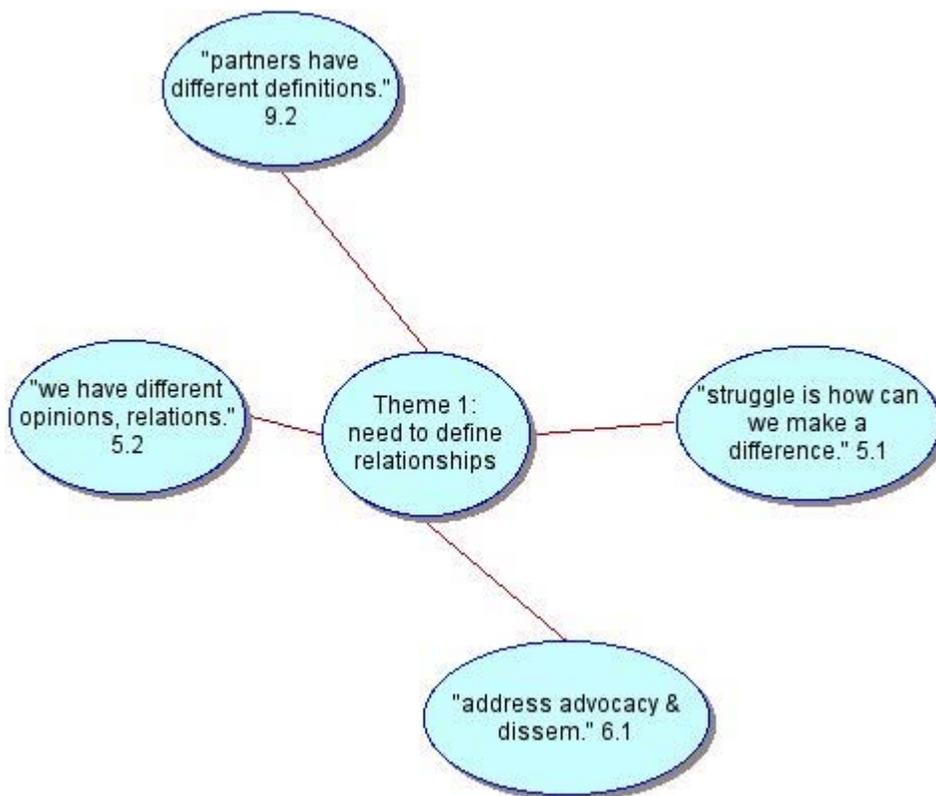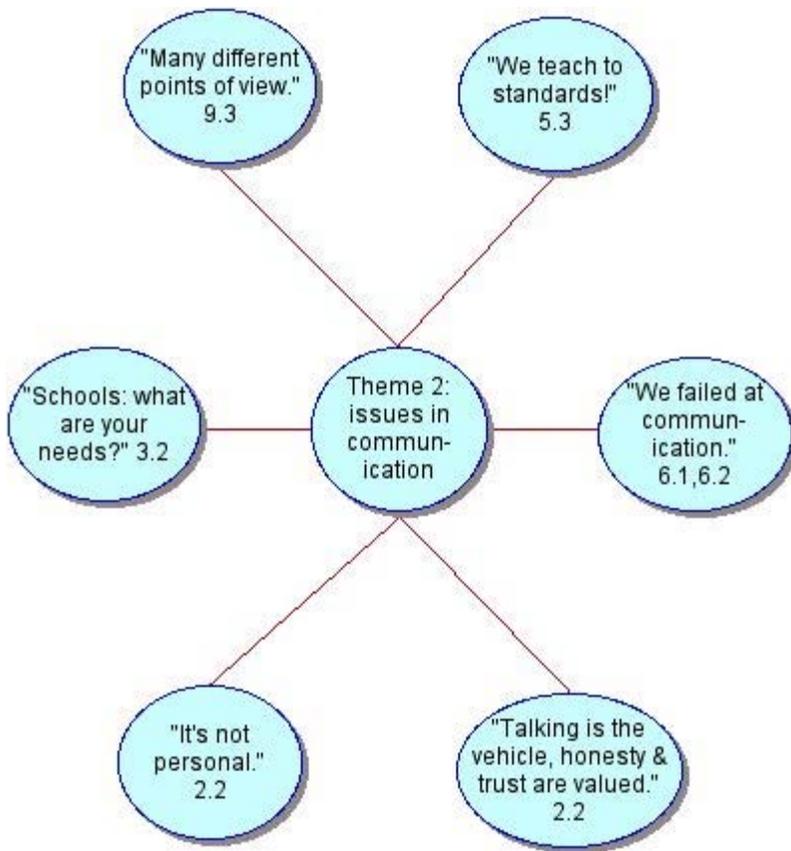difference." 5.1

"address advocacy &
dissem." 6.1

Figure 1. Define relationships.

Figure 2. Issues in communication.

Figure 3. Nature of a partnership.

"Leaders have left the university." 7.1

"We're in transition, superintendent left." 7.2

Theme 4: Prepare to deal with change.

"Maintain team focus on key questions." 4.2

"We've had to determine our goals together." 7.3
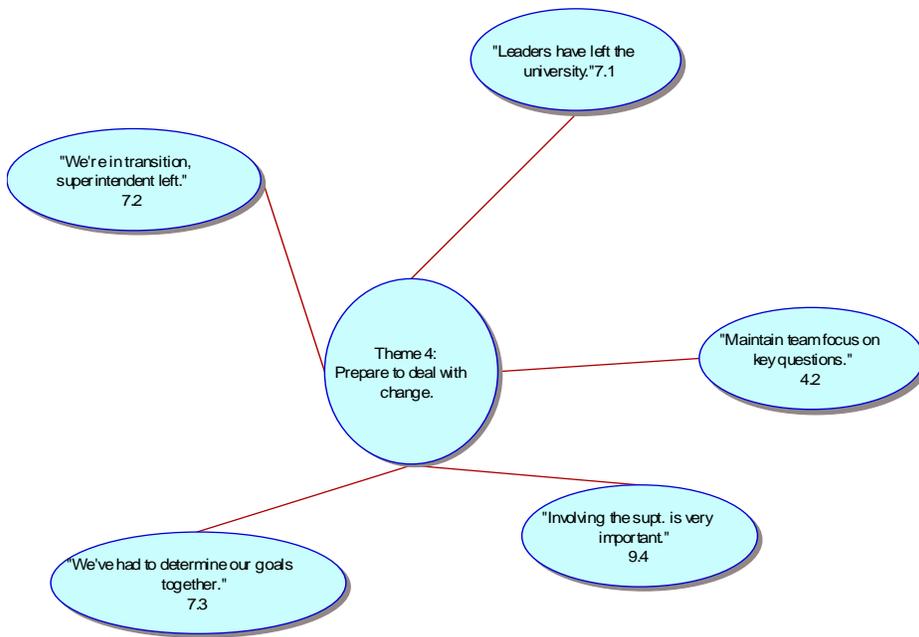
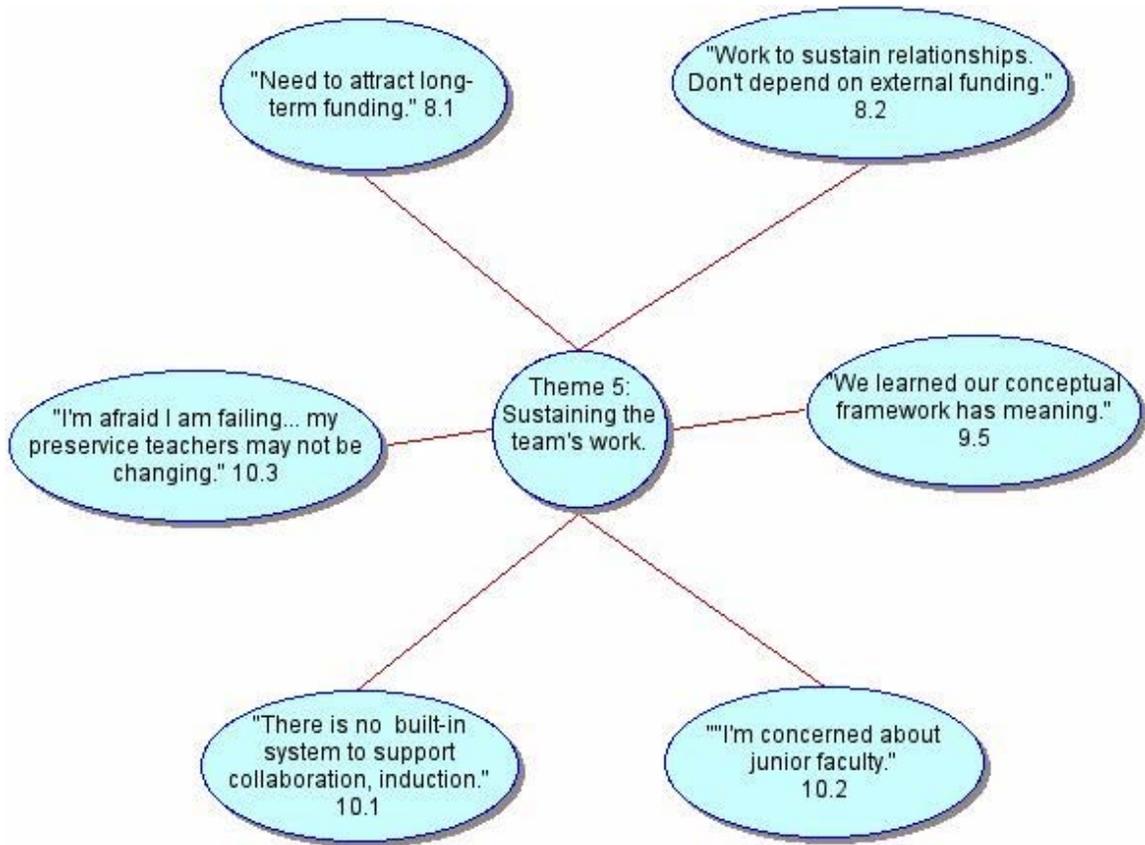"Involving the supt. is very important." 9.4

Figure 4. Prepare to deal with change.

Figure 5. Sustaining the team's work.